



Peace and Conflict Studies

Volume 15

Number 1 *Political Discourse as an Instrument of
Conflict and Peace: Lessons from Northern Ireland*

Article 3

8-1-2008

Political Discourse in the Republic of Ireland and its Function in the Troubles and Peace Process in Northern Ireland

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Recommended Citation

O'Donnell, Catherine (2008) "Political Discourse in the Republic of Ireland and its Function in the Troubles and Peace Process in Northern Ireland," *Peace and Conflict Studies*: Vol. 15: No. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/pcs/vol15/iss1/3>

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POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND AND ITS FUNCTION IN THE TROUBLES AND PEACE PROCESS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Catherine O'Donnell

Abstract

Despite some historical divergence, political parties in the Republic of Ireland shared some key objectives in response to the Troubles. Most consistently, each of the main parties (Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael) sought to undermine support for the IRA in Northern Ireland and de-legitimise arguments by Sinn Féin and the IRA. Over the course of the peace process, such common priorities developed into a wider shared discourse on the principles for agreement in Northern Ireland. The parties in the Republic soon established a vocal consensus incorporating support for the Good Friday Agreement, Sinn Féin involvement in politics in Northern Ireland, reconciliation, and a pluralist republicanism. The emergence of this common discourse has been essential to the legitimacy and durability of the peace process.

Introduction

Thinking about what caused the conflict in Northern Ireland, why it went on for so long and how and why it came to the end it did we often dwell on the mobilisation of nationalism and unionist divisions in the 1960s, politicisation of the republican movement in later years, the changing policies of the British and Irish government and the development of thought within unionism and loyalism. Thus we quite often prioritise political developments, political processes and relations, ideology and strategy. This volume is a welcome opportunity to examine how political discourse (as the communication in speech or written form of policy positions and ideological points by political parties and actors) fits into this complex web. Doing so helps us to provide a more complete explanation as to the Northern Ireland conflict and peace process. Political discourses offer a lot in terms of understanding the motives and decisions of key players, their interpretation

of developments and also inform us of their audiences. Political discourses do not develop accidentally and are generally employed with intent and purpose. In the Irish case, as will be demonstrated here, the political discourses used by the main parties in the Republic of Ireland on the subject of Northern Ireland since the outbreak of the troubles help to explain to us why the peace process took the shape it did and why it was that the Irish government and, in particular, Fianna Fáil, played a key role in this.

Nationalism and the unresolved “national question” on Northern Ireland were always accepted as central to Irish politics and accounted to a large extent for party political divisions (See Mair, 1987). This was the case since the Civil War, which followed the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, led to the split in Sinn Féin and the subsequent formation of Cumann na nGaedheal (later Fine Gael) and Fianna Fáil. Given its opposition to the Treaty and emergence from Sinn Féin in 1926, Fianna Fáil presented itself as the true heir of the republican tradition in Ireland and as the party likely to realise the dream of a united Ireland. At the outbreak of the Troubles in the late 1960s and early 1970s this division on the “national question” was brought into focus again. The Arms Crisis of 1970, where members of the Fianna Fáil government were accused of assisting in the importation of arms to the IRA in Northern Ireland (See O’Brien, 2000), together with the use of traditional anti-partitionist language by Fianna Fáil meant that Fianna Fáil was once again confirmed in the public mind as the more devout republican party. This was particularly so when contrasted to Fine Gael’s decision to champion the principle of consent - that is that the constitutional position of Northern Ireland could not be altered without the consent of a majority of people there (Noonan, 2006; Harte, 2005; Fine Gael, 1979, p. 4). The development of their respective party discourses on Northern Ireland is central to understanding how the parties differed on the subject.

It is in this context that this article examines the official discourses used by the main political parties in the Republic of Ireland when they refer to Northern Ireland. It seeks to illustrate the different functions which political discourse in the Republic has played during the conflict as well as during the peace process. In the first section the article will look at the political discourses employed by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael over the course of the Troubles. Section Two will show that political discourse in the Republic on Ireland has also played a key role in the peace process. An agreed political discourse reflecting the consensus that has emerged on Northern Ireland plays an important role in the operation of the peace process and the implementation of Good Friday Agreement.

Official Discourse during the Troubles

During the conflict both parties shared a common aim to de-legitimise the IRA and Sinn Féin but they approached this in different ways. Fine Gael advanced an alternative discourse as a challenge to Sinn Féin and found itself a friend to the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) in Northern Ireland. Rejecting Sinn Féin, Fine Gael endorsed the SDLP as the legitimate representative of nationalism in Northern Ireland. Seeking to fortify the SDLP position and interpretation of politics and the conflict in Northern Ireland, Fine Gael's policy and discourse was often similar to that articulated by the SDLP. Fine Gael also often concurred with SDLP proposals for the resolution of the conflict in Northern Ireland and this is seen most clearly through Fine Gael's involvement in the New Ireland Forum of 1983-4 and the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement.

Fianna Fáil in contrast sought to discredit Sinn Féin and the IRA's violent campaign by adopting an alternative but equally strong republican and anti-partitionist position. Fianna Fáil sought to disown Sinn Féin and the IRA as descendents of the 1916 Rising republican tradition and instead claimed that mantle for the Fianna Fáil party. At the 1985 Fianna Fáil Ard Fheis party leader, Charles J. Haughey, said:

Fianna Fáil, as the Republican party, is proud to be the political embodiment of the separatist, national tradition that is central to the freedom and independence of the Irish nation. Republicanism for us means adherence to the principles of the 1916 Proclamation, which asserted the right of the Irish people to national freedom and sovereignty, and which guaranteed religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunity to all citizens. (Haughey, 1985).

It was not just in its use of republican anti-partitionist language that Fianna Fáil sought to undermine the IRA and Sinn Féin. In the era of the Jack Lynch leadership (1966-73), as we will see, Fianna Fáil matched this discourse with a reunification policy at Anglo-Irish level aimed at removing the reasons for IRA violence.

Fianna Fáil Discourse on Northern Ireland

Jack Lynch was leader of Fianna Fáil and Taoiseach at the outbreak of the Troubles. While calling for reform and expressing concerns for the nationalist population in Northern Ireland, Lynch was publicly critical of

IRA violence and stressed that the Irish government “have no intention of using force to realise this desire [re-unification]” (Lynch, 1971, p. 10). He also maintained that “there is no solution to be found to our disagreements by shooting each other. There is no real invader here” (Lynch, 1971, p. 22). Throughout the Lynch years and into Fianna Fáil’s time under subsequent leader, Charles J. Haughey, the party rejected violence as a legitimate way to redress problems in Northern Ireland or as a way to pursue Irish unity. Like Lynch, Haughey rejected an IRA mandate:

All but a tiny minority understand that violence can never bring a solution and that it serves only to perpetuate division and hatred. Let us make it absolutely clear that no Irish Government will tolerate any attempt by any group to put themselves above the law or to arrogate to themselves any of the functions of the Government. There is only one army in this State, one police force and one judiciary, appointed under the Constitution, to uphold the laws. The Government, acting for the people, will ensure that these laws are effective and are enforced. Democracy will be defended and the rule of law upheld. That is an essential element of national policy. (Haughey, 1980):

Yet despite consistently stating that the IRA campaign did not have a mandate (Lynch, 30 November 1971), Fianna Fáil argued, from the outset of the Troubles, that Irish unity was the only viable long term solution for Northern Ireland. Like Éamon de Valera before him, Lynch claimed that Ireland’s right to national self-determination underlined the party’s belief in unity as the ultimate solution (Lynch, 1 November 1968). At the 1969 party Ard Fheis, Lynch made clear that his government’s concentration on human rights, discrimination and reform in Northern Ireland did not “in any way indicate the abandonment by us (Fianna Fáil) of our just claim that the historic unity of this island be restored” (Lynch, 1969). Lynch believed that the emerging troubles in Northern Ireland were a direct consequence of partition and that their resolution lay in the undoing of partition. He also placed the blame for partition squarely with the British government. In October 1968, Lynch claimed that “partition is the first and foremost root cause. And partition arose out of British policy” (Lynch, 8 October 1968). In an address to the Anglo-Irish Parliamentary Group some weeks later he repeated the view that “the clashes in the streets of Derry are an expression of the evils which partition has brought in its train” (Lynch, 30 October 1968).

It is not merely in Lynch's rhetoric that the claim to unity was expressed. Lynch also attempted to pursue this claim at a political level and for the first time in the history of the party, Fianna Fáil actively pursued a policy of reunification at Anglo-Irish level. While it is not the intention here to substantially quote from the archives, a look at the records from meetings at Anglo-Irish level reveals the rationale for Lynch's reunification-based discourse and policy.

At a meeting with the British Prime Minister, Edward Heath, in September 1971 Lynch reiterated that "partition was imposed and its existence always constituted a threat of violence because of the efforts to maintain Unionists in power" (Lynch, September 1971). Significantly, Lynch went on to say that "The IRA is a by-product of that situation (where the majority continued in power in Northern Ireland)" and if the British Prime Minister "could find it possible to state that the unification of Ireland would have to be the ultimate solution and gave an assurance of interest in working towards this end, this would be enormously helpful at the present time" (Lynch, September 1971). The Irish government and Lynch were of the view that if the British government were to move towards a policy of Irish unification then the reasons for the IRA would cease to exist. According to Lynch, support for the IRA could be diminished if a political initiative was put in place to move towards unity and to improve conditions for nationalists in Northern Ireland. Lynch clearly believed in the legitimacy of the call for a united Ireland and interpreted the conflict in Northern Ireland in these terms. More importantly Fianna Fáil believed that addressing the reasons for IRA violence was the key to bringing the conflict to an end in the short to immediate term. Thus Fianna Fáil attempted to gain progress towards Irish unity at a political level believing that if the Irish government could prove that constitutional avenues could offer progress towards unity this would both remove the reasons for IRA violence and undermine support for the IRA.

So while Fianna Fáil criticised IRA violence, its approach from the outset of the Troubles was to articulate a strong republican discourse and anti-partitionist policy at governmental level in the pursuit of a united Ireland as an alternative to the IRA violent campaign. The problem was that Lynch had no success in his attempts to put in place an initiative for Northern Ireland that might result in a united Ireland. This was mainly due to the fact that the British government did not accept that the Irish government had any right to be involved in discussions relating to Northern Ireland (See Bew *et al.*, 1997, pp. 43-4) but also due to the reality of unionist opposition to such an outcome. As such Lynch endorsed the IRA pursuit of Irish reunification in

his choice of language but could not deliver any progress on this through constitutional mechanisms. In fact Lynch's inability to match anti-partitionist language with delivery at Anglo-Irish level further underlined for IRA supporters the argument that constitutional politics could not deliver. The failure of this approach also reinforced the republican discourse (in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland) which stressed British responsibility in relation to Northern Ireland.

Despite failure at this point, Fianna Fáil remained consistent in its attempts to make political progress towards a settlement involving unity as a mechanism to remove the reasons for IRA violence. In the 1980s Haughey believed this settlement would develop at an Anglo-Irish level. He argued that Northern Ireland was a failed political entity and stressed the need for the Irish and British governments to 'work together to find a formula and lift the situation onto a new plane that will bring permanent peace and stability to the people of these islands'. In Haughey's view this new Anglo-Irish approach would begin with "a declaration by the British Government of their interest in encouraging the unity of Ireland, by agreement and in peace [and this] would open the way towards an entirely new situation in which peace, real lasting peace, would become an attainable reality" (Haughey, 1980). While this is not exactly how it panned out, the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 and the potential benefits of a peace process persuaded the republican movement of the progress that could be made politically if violence was absent.

While still seeking the mechanism to illustrate to republicans that constitutionalism could deliver progress towards unity, Fianna Fáil continued its use of anti-partitionist language and a strong republican position as an alternative to Sinn Féin and the IRA campaign. For Haughey this involved a rejection of the principle of consent and an insistence that talks with unionists would only involve discussion as to the form of a united Ireland and not about whether reunification might happen – "when we speak of the need to secure the agreement of the unionist population that agreement applies to the new arrangements for, but not to the concept of, a united Ireland" (*Dáil Éireann Debates*, Vol. 361, Cols. 2579-2600, 19 November 1985). Haughey's rationale for this was similar to that of Lynch's as seen above in his meetings at Anglo-Irish level and this is illustrated in the response by Haughey to *The Unionist Case* (a submission to the Taoiseach and leader of the Opposition by unionist Robert McCartney). In this response, Haughey argued that the Irish government's position on Northern Ireland must aim to limit the strength of Sinn Féin and the IRA. Haughey believed that if the Irish government abandoned the claim to Irish unity then

republican violence would increase as nationalists in Northern Ireland would feel abandoned and the IRA's argument that no option other than violence was open to them would appear to be strengthened. Haughey wrote:

It is a great illusion to suppose that if the Irish government were to recognise the validity of partition and to abandon the concept of a united Ireland that this would necessarily bring a diminution of violence. On the contrary, the only likely consequence would be a threat to the stability of the twenty-six counties as well as the six counties. An Irish government, which would abandon the fundamental democratic aspiration of the Irish people on both sides of the border, would invite repudiation possible in a form, which would only aggravate the existing conflict in Northern Ireland (Mansergh, 1986, p. 574).

Thus the use of traditional republican rhetoric by Fianna Fáil in the 1970s and the 1980s and indeed more recently was and is aimed at undermining the ideological arguments put forward to justify the IRA campaign. Success towards a united Ireland at a political constitutional level was pursued in order to highlight the futility of violence and limit the level of support for IRA violence and Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland and in the Republic, in particular. It was and is also intended to limit the electoral threat from Sinn Féin. It must be said also that the articulation of a united Ireland reflected and continues to reflect the long-term position of Fianna Fáil. Fianna Fáil does not necessarily dispute the IRA or Sinn Féin's interpretation of the conflict in Northern Ireland and agrees that unity is the ultimate solution. Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil shared a use of anti-partitionist centred discourse but what differentiated the two parties was Fianna Fáil's belief in constitutional mechanisms as the correct and most successful approach. It was the shared interpretations that ultimately convinced Sinn Féin that it could adopt a political approach which involved building a working relationship and an agreed position with the Irish government. It is for this reason also that in working with the Irish government, Sinn Féin prefers to work with an Irish government led by Fianna Fáil (See Adams, 2003, p. 197 for views on this).

Fine Gael and the Labour Party Discourse on Northern Ireland

The common objectives by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour in seeking to undermine Sinn Féin and the IRA have already been outlined.

What then was it that distinguished the Fine Gael approach in terms of discourse to that of Fianna Fáil and how did these discourses function together? Did they act to complement or oppose each other? These are some of the questions addressed in this section.

Given its history as a strong defender of the constitutional tradition in Ireland, its declaration of the Republic in 1949 coupled with a celebration of the State's connections with the British State and Commonwealth (See O'Donnell, 2008) it is not surprising that it was Fine Gael and not Fianna Fáil that reacted to the outbreak of the Troubles with attempts at reassessment and debate on the "national question" and Northern Ireland. This was very much influenced and led by the party's leader from 1977-87, Garret FitzGerald, who had a significant interest in Northern Ireland. Fine Gael members saw the party as having a role in reshaping attitudes and interpretations and in leading debate and discourse in the Republic as to Northern Ireland, republicanism and the achievement of a united Ireland. This was outlined by the party's spokesperson on Northern Ireland and prominent border TD, Paddy Harte, in a speech to the Fine Gael Ard Fheis, 20 May 1978. He said:

The challenge facing [the] Fine Gael leadership is to continue to guide southern opinion in the correct direction towards Irish nationhood and to involve the Party at all levels throughout the Republic in promoting better understanding of the complexities of Northern Irish life (Harte, 20 May 1978).

Like Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin, Fine Gael and Labour reaffirmed the ideal of a united Ireland (See Hayward, 2004, pp. 23-24), but they did not seek to present a strong republican position but rather alternative argument and alternative policy positions. Instead while Fianna Fáil talked about the ultimate solution of unity, national self-determination and Britain's responsibility in relation to Northern Ireland, Fine Gael, in agreement with the Labour Party, only talked about unity coming about through consent. On this point, Fine Gael has been consistent. In 1969, Fine Gael was proactive in its unilateral endorsement of the principle of consent and this has remained party policy (See Fine Gael, 1969 in Harte, 2005; See also Fine Gael, 1979, p. 4; Noonan, 2006; Deenihan, 2006). We've seen above Fianna Fáil's alternative interpretation as to what the principle of consent entailed and indeed this represented much of the disagreement between the two parties through the 1970s and 1980s.

Another point rejected by Fianna Fáil but on which Fine Gael and Labour did not shift was the need, in their view, for the Republic to become

more pluralist. They argued that Ireland's legislation would have to be made more attractive to unionists. FitzGerald, Harte and others in Fine Gael acknowledged that constitutional reform in the Republic was necessary before Unionists would contemplate unity. As early as February 1972, Paddy Harte talked about the need for "the foundations of a new and just society" to be assured before unity could take place. He argued that:

Reunification is not yet on the agenda and we in the Republic have many changes to achieve before it will even be acceptable for debate by the most moderate of Unionist. Nothing short of a completely new Constitution leading in the direction of a Pluralist Society will be sufficient as an initial step on our part (Harte, 21 November 1972).

Harte consistently argued that "Ireland united must mean the total acceptance of the policies, the cultures, the traditions and the religious beliefs of all Irish people and the freedom to express and practice these things in a natural way. Unless this is accepted Irish unity is a myth and an illusion and Irish nationhood can never be gained" (Harte, 4 October 1978).

Harte's views reflected those of his leader, Garret FitzGerald, who also stressed the need for a more pluralist republic as a prerequisite to unity (FitzGerald, 1972, pp. 142-57) and, as Taoiseach, set about the completion of a "constitutional crusade" (Mair, 1987, p. 97). He outlined his party's policies for government as including "the creation of a pluralist society as a basis upon which to build a new relationship between North and South" (*Dáil Éireann Debates*, Vol. 337, Col. 577, 1 July 1982). Thus Fine Gael's discourse centred around what former Fine Gael leader, Michael Noonan, has described the twin pillars of Fine Gael thought on Northern Ireland, that is, an acceptance of the principle of consent and a recognition that "there's an obligation to try to accommodate difference by having a more pluralist society down here" (Noonan, 2006).

As already mentioned Fine Gael's policy and discourse on Northern Ireland (in particular the emphasis on the principle of consent and unity) was very much influenced by the SDLP. While in government in the 1980s, Fine Gael sought to bolster the position of constitutional nationalism in the North and this was the rationale for FitzGerald's pursuit of an Anglo-Irish process which led to the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985 (See FitzGerald, 1993, pp. 191-2). Fine Gael had up to this point stressed consent and pluralism and seeking agreement with Protestants in Northern Ireland. However, now that the SDLP was perceived to be facing an electoral threat from Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland, Fine Gael prioritised a deal with the British government in

order to strengthen the position of the SDLP. Through the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the Irish government sought to bolster the SDLP by securing nationalist representation in Northern Ireland and an Irish dimension – both of which were key demands made by the SDLP.

Discourses as Functions of Politics in Northern Ireland

Fine Gael's motivation in signing the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 is well known in terms of undermining the electoral threat which Sinn Féin posed to the SDLP in Northern Ireland in the aftermath of the Hunger Strikes there in 1981. In addition to this, the Anglo-Irish Agreement also affected a reassessment within the republican movement and forced a debate among its members as to the gains that could be made at political level (On republicanism and the peace process see English, 2003). This was an important, if unplanned, outcome of Fine Gael efforts. Fianna Fáil's use of republican anti-partitionist discourse is important here too. Given Fianna Fáil's republican position up to that point it was the obvious party in the Republic from which Sinn Féin sought assistance in the late 1980s when it looked for a way out of its isolating armed struggle (See O'Donnell, 2003; Mallie and McKittrick, 2001)).

These are important points in understanding the emergence of the peace process in the late 1980s but what functions did the two alternative set of discourses utilised by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael play in this? The answer to this lays in understanding the parties' objectives and assessing their success in these. As outlined, both parties were concerned to undermine Sinn Féin and the IRA's argument in favour of violence in Northern Ireland as well as to limit support for the republican movement. Fine Gael was particularly concerned with the effect of growing support for Sinn Féin in the 1980s on the SDLP in Northern Ireland. Fianna Fáil was also fearful of the effect on their support base in the Republic. How successful were they in their efforts?

Fine Gael's main achievement was in its traditional concentration on the principle of consent and pluralism as a way of reaching out to unionists and in gaining recognition for these ideas. In contrast, Fianna Fáil's historical articulation of the Irish right to national self-determination and vocalisation of its belief in unity as the only acceptable outcome successfully maintained the republican constituency in the Republic mainly in the Fianna Fáil fold and acted as a deterrent to those in the Republic who might otherwise have supported Sinn Féin and the IRA if a republican vacuum had been allowed to exist. It also meant that Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin had many ideological points in common and enabled it to bring Sinn Féin into mainstream constitutional politics in the 1990s.

Thus both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael played important roles, through their choice of discourse, in creating the conditions for the peace process. Fine Gael incorporated the principle of consent into official political discourse in the Republic. Fianna Fáil, through its anti-partitionist discourse and concentration on self-determination, provided the avenue for which to bring Sinn Féin into discussion from the late 1980s onwards. Both sets of discourses had important goals and eventually played complementary roles in the development of the peace process and in framing the Good Friday Agreement. Ultimately they shared the same agenda to undermine support for the IRA. Both parties would now claim the peace process as an endorsement of their individual positions and discourses on Northern Ireland since the beginning of the Troubles.

Political Discourse and the Peace Process

A central part of the peace process experience in the Republic has been the development of a cross-party political and ideological consensus on long-term and short-term policies and goals for Northern Ireland. This new political consensus plays a key role in maintaining the peace process and in implementing the Good Friday Agreement. The political parties have been articulating a discourse on Northern Ireland that illustrates the emergence of agreement on a number of levels. The consensus reached by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael on Northern Ireland is based on their support for the Good Friday Agreement which both parties endorsed in 1998 (See Bertie Ahern, *Dáil Éireann Debates* Vol. 489, Col. 1029, 21 April 1998 and John Bruton, *Dáil Éireann Debates* Vol. 489, Col. 1038, 21 April 1998). By endorsing the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael agreed on the reformulation of the relevant Articles the 1937 Constitution of Ireland and an ideological formula involving the concepts of self-determination and the principle of consent. Both parties have declared their immediate goal for Northern Ireland to be the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement with unity as a long-term objective. The Fianna Fáil manifesto in 2002 asserted the party's priority to "secure lasting peace in Ireland through the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement" without "prejudice to the ultimate goal of achieving a united Ireland" (*The Irish Times*, 26 April 2002). Under successive leaders, Fine Gael has supported the peace process and has also articulated the long-term objective of unity (Deenihan, 2006; Hayes, 2006; See also Coveney, 2004).

As part of their shared support for the Good Friday Agreement and the peace process the language of the peace process as espoused by the main

parties in the Republic has been framed within the terms of reconciliation and a peaceful settlement. There has also emerged a common understanding between Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil (and Sinn Féin) on the meaning of republicanism as democratic, pluralist and as accepting of the principle of consent. This development is reflected in many of the party leaders' speeches. The Fine Gael leader, Enda Kenny, describes the republic as one that "upholds and practises true republican traditions - freedom, pluralism, justice, equality, brotherhood" (Kenny, 2007). Former Fianna Fáil leader, Bertie Ahern, has agreed: "We value religious liberty and practice religious tolerance. Our success in Ireland is based on democratic republicanism and is inspired by the principles of equality and fraternity" (Ahern, 2004).

Also central to the agreed discourse in favour of the peace process and the Good Friday Agreement is the central role for Sinn Féin within the peace process and politics in Northern Ireland. Both parties have talked about the peace process as existing only through the inclusion of Sinn Féin. For example, former leader of Fine Gael, Michael Noonan, has stated that "certainly there is no peace process without Sinn Féin" (Noonan, 2006) and former Deputy Leader of Fianna Fáil, Mary O'Rourke, has also argued that "there was going to be no process without them (Sinn Féin)" (O'Rourke, 2005). This belief in Sinn Féin inclusion is a major component of what the discourse of the peace process involves.

Both parties are also in agreement though that the peace process does not mean that Sinn Féin should be considered suitable for government in the Republic. Fianna Fáil have taken this position on the grounds that 'Northern Ireland is a different environment' and therefore "different considerations apply" (Treacy, 2005). Fine Gael's Brian Hayes has also argued that putting Sinn Féin in government in the Republic would be wrong on the basis that "the Republic is not the North. We don't have divided allegiance in this part of the island. The Northern Ireland Assembly is a regional parliament, established with the purpose of bringing together the divided and sectarian society that is Northern Ireland" (*Sunday Independent*, 17 October 2004).

What does this mean for Northern Ireland?

The first section of this article outlines the function which the chosen discourses by the parties in the Republic played in the course of the troubles in Northern Ireland and the emergence of the peace process in the late 1980s. Similarly, the language used by the parties in the Republic plays a significant part in ensuring the longevity of the peace process as the accepted political initiative for Northern Ireland and has contained any support for an

alternative approach. This shared discourse among the parties in the Republic and in Britain has had a highly significant impact in ensuring the maintenance and legitimacy of the peace process in the public mind.

If we remember the situation in the aftermath of the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement we can understand the importance of political consensus for political peace initiatives. While Fianna Fáil continued to implement the Anglo-Irish Agreement when it came to power in 1987, Haughey consistently endorsed the idea of a process that would “transcend the existing framework for Northern Ireland” (Haughey, *The Irish Times*, 23 April 1988). This opened up the opportunity to renegotiate the Agreement and to find a process that would replace it. No such prospect exists now. The existence of cross-party support for the peace process in Britain means that this new cross-party agreement in the Republic on Northern Ireland is even more significant. Both governments have been firm in their support for the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, the peace process and more importantly the inclusion of Sinn Féin. This has been particularly important in forcing the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and, more recently, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to engage with the peace process as a political reality. Both governments became converted to the peace process despite unionist opposition and unionists have been forced to respond to this (On the unionist experience of the peace process see Farrington, 2005). In short, the emergence of a cross-party discourse, which reflects the consensus that exists in the Republic, as well as in Britain, on short-term and long-term policies for Northern Ireland, has removed the political space for an alternative initiative for Northern Ireland.

In addition, the cross-party endorsement of the constitutional change that was involved in the Good Friday Agreement was crucial to gaining overwhelming public support for change and ensured the relatively uncontroversial referendum campaign in the Republic in 1998. If the parties in the Republic had disagreed on the Good Friday Agreement (as was the case with the Anglo-Irish Agreement) the entire project would have been weakened.

Conclusion

The role and purpose of political discourse is an important component of attempts to understand the conflict and peace process in Northern Ireland. As has been illustrated by the other contributions to this volume, the articulation of key ideas, political and ideological positions by the parties in Northern Ireland are central to this. Equally important has been the official

political discourse on Northern Ireland in the Republic of Ireland. This has played important but differing roles in the Troubles and the peace process.

Throughout the Troubles Fianna Fáil discourse centred around the right to national self-determination, unity as the ultimate solution and British responsibility in relation to Northern Ireland. Fianna Fáil pursued a reunification policy and discourse with the aim of removing the reasons for IRA violence through constitutional progress towards unity. It also sought to limit the level of support for Sinn Féin and the IRA in the Republic by providing a strong republican alternative and avoiding a republican vacuum from which Sinn Féin could benefit. While Fianna Fáil could not demonstrate in the 1970s and 1980s that constitutional mechanisms could provide progress towards unity it successfully limited the appeal of militant republicanism in the main to Northern Ireland. By the late 1980s when Sinn Féin sought to bring republicans into mainstream politics, the ideology and language that it shared with Fianna Fáil opened up an avenue through which to establish the pan-nationalist alliance which became so central to the peace process (See O'Donnell, 2007).

Fine Gael, and Labour, also sought to undermine the credibility of the arguments articulated by the republican movement in justifying IRA violence. Fine Gael articulated a challenging and new discourse on Northern Ireland based around the principle of consent and a pluralist society in the Republic prior to unity. It was very much influenced by the SDLP and its policy in the 1980s had the objective of bolstering the SDLP in the North against an electoral threat from Sinn Féin in the years after the IRA Hunger Strikes. Much of Fine Gael's language on the principle of consent and republicanism as a pluralist and democratic concept provided the framework for the Good Friday Agreement and the language of the peace process (See O'Donnell, 2008). The short-term policy and discourse differences between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael had important complementary impacts on politics in Northern Ireland. As a result of its commitment to removing the reasons for IRA violence, Fianna Fáil provided much of the basis and rationale for the peace process by making a process involving Sinn Féin likely. By emphasising the principle of consent, Fine Gael provided much of the framework for the constitutional reform undertaken by the Republic of Ireland through the Good Friday Agreement.

The language by the parties in the Republic continues to have an important function for Northern Ireland as the peace process develops. While the aim throughout the conflict was to undermine Sinn Féin and the IRA, the aim now is to endorse the peace process as the only political initiative for Northern Ireland. Key to achieving this has been the cross-party consensus

that has emerged in the Republic of Ireland (and in Britain) during the peace process on ideological, short and long-term policy points in relation to Northern Ireland. This consensus and shared discourse is key to explaining the durability of the peace process despite the problems it has faced.

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